Chapter 4

IN THE BEAUTY OF THE LILIES
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Years ago, in one of his glittering essays, Updike wrote of his admiration for novels that ‘give us, through the consciousness of characters, a geography amplified by history, a chunk of the planet.’ Up till then, the chunk of planet, Updike had chosen to explore himself – 20th century America, as colonised by middle class – had been most knowingly and most intimately chronicled in his Rabbit novels, a quarter of books that gave us four decades of American life as seen through the experiences of a high school basket ball star turned car salesman, Harry (Rabbit) Angstrom. In his novels ‘Updike tries to cover the last half century of American history, from the beginning of Cold War to the Millennial Reflections’.

(Catherine Morley, 2000)

Then, in In the Beauty of the Lilies (1996), Updike took on an even more daunting project: to chart the fortunes of an American family through four generations and some eighty years, and in doing so, create a portrait of the country, from its nervous entry into the 20th Century to its stumbling approach to the millennium. This Wilmot family is seen struggling through their successive bouts with religious doubt, mediocrity, fame, and fanaticism. (Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 139)

Religion, of course, has rumbled through the pages of Updike’s fiction from the start, from the books like The Poorhouse Fair and A Month of Sundays through Couples and Roger's Version. Most of Updike’s heroes feel themselves torn between their spiritual aspirations and their fleshly compulsion, between their yearning for redemption and their dark suspicion that no meaning exists. Like Henry Bech, they worry that they are nothing but ‘a fleck of dust condemned to know that it is a fleck of dust’. Like the Witches of East wick, they see that ‘the outside of things was sunshine and scatter’ while ‘the inside of everything was death’. But in this novel, apart from
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the consciousness for valuelessness, ‘Updike focuses on the mysterious future in addition to the nostalgia for the past’. (Schiff, 2002)

The existential anxieties culminate in the opening pages of the novel when the progenitor of Updike’s American family, Rev. Clarence Arthur Wilmot, suffers an acute spiritual crisis. It is 1910, and one fine spring afternoon in Paterson, New Jersey, Clarence feels ‘the last particles of faith leave him’ forever. The loss comes as a palpable, physical sensation and it leaves Clarence adrift in a universe suddenly rendered empty and devoid of hope. (Beauty of the Lilies, 05)

The opening pages also attribute departure of faith from Clarence’s self with the loss of consciousness of the ‘struggling Hollywood star Mary Pickford who faints on the set of a movie’. This vague attribution leads us to more than one direction. First, a creature without faith is as lifeless, as spiritless, and as mentally numb as one who loses consciousness. Such creature has no more relation with or liveliness as it is unaware of the element of hope around it. Secondly, creating an artificial image of life on silver screen and colouring it according to our taste is just escapism from the reality. The moment Clarence lost his faith, his Godless, graceless soul succumbed itself to the artificiality of life on screen and escapism. (Frank Kermode, 1996)

It’s not that Clarence never tried to avoid such Godlessness but the very specks of atheism were despised by him. Lately, he had engaged himself in studying Robert Ingersoll, the famous atheist, whose Some Mistakes of Moses had the content:

‘. . .the God of Pentateuch was an absurd bully, barbarically thundering through a cosmos entirely misconceived. There is no such God, nor there should be.’ (Beauty of the Lilies, 05)

Clarence had been reading Ingersoll ‘in order to refute it for a perturbed parishioner’. (Beauty of the Lilies, 05) And here the irony worked. Instead of pushing atheism
away, Clarence himself was caught in its shackles. It’s not that he was driven towards them willingly and hastily but he had been trying hard to retain his faith in spite of repeated attacks of Godlessness:

Clarence’s mind...like a many-legged...wingless insect...been struggling to climb...walls of...a slick-walled porcelain basin...now a sudden...wash of water swept it down into the drain. There is no God.

(Beauty of the Lilies, 05-06)

This blasphemous knowledge dawned upon him as a ghastly moment, a silent sounding of bottomlessness, a curious lightness and flatness in sounds which are indicators of life; for Clarence, life seemed to have lost its resonating base. The baselessness of this feeling seemed to justify what Clarence has suspected for a long time – universe had no relation with the betterment or deterioration of human being, i.e. universe is completely disinterested and detached from creatures and empty of ‘divine content’. All the criteria of God had evaporated into fumes, except cruelty and death, which after being devoid of God’s grace, had become simply facts. Such facts can be treated by subjecting them to oblivion as forgetting them is the only comforter. All the stressing questions and riddles like – Man can never have free will as long as God is the sole possessor of the perfect freedom; Why Man is blamed when all actions are predicated by God? – these questions which pressed upon Clarence’s mind simply evaporated. These questions always demanded the need for ‘justification of ways of God to men’ (Milton’s Paradise Lost). But now the strain was lifted at a blow. Clarence’s mental pressure relaxed but even then the chasm left by the absence of faith was appalling. It has been a history that under the influence of atheism human beings lost their graceful value. In the same way, Clarence’s own life would soon rot as a creature full of life gradually turns into layers of fossiliferous rocks and coal after
its ‘death’. Some hopeless and terrible feelings attacked right then. Without Biblical blessing, the physical universe seemed surprisingly horrible and disgusting. The thought of people slaying animals and eating disgusted him:

All fleshy acts became vile, rather than merely some. The reality of men slaying lambs and cattle, fish and fowl to sustain their own bodies took on an aspect of grisly comedy – the blood soaked selfishness of a cosmic mayhem.

The thought of eating sickened Clarence. . .

*(Beauty of the Lilies, 07)*

Mr. Clarence Wilmot knew that internally atheism had crashed his hard earned faithful self. Faith is the only thing that imparts hope and here it’s withdrawal from Clarence’s self marked a ‘pitch-smooth black of utter hopelessness’.

*(Beauty of the Lilies, 10)*

Clarence was well aware of his internal crumbling spirit but he longed for an external sign to prove the aftermath effects of atheism; a sort of punishment by furious, dejected God. What was God waiting for? Why did not he retaliate and punish him? Interior guilt made him wait and stand there wondering to bear upon himself the wrath of God:

He stood baffled, looking about the dining room for some exterior sign of the fatal alteration within him. There is no God . . . Yet no exterior change of colour betrayed the event . . . the mahogany dining table . . . the tiffany – glass chandelier . . . the bow-front sideboard, the brown wall-paper . . . none of these mute surfaces reflected the sudden absence of God from the universe. . .

*(Beauty of the Lilies, 10)*

God’s universe, which consisted of angels, Christ, Providence, ultimate mercy and even eternal heaven, is now devoid of ‘the passionately debated distinctions of
Sublapsarianism, Supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism, in regard to the precise moment when God imposes election. Though his present state was that of a ‘depleted’, a creature stripped off his grace yet he felt a distinction in his shape. He felt his own identity independent of God. The sense of freedom overtook him. He felt the courage to be angry and resentful against his past long captor who had his authority over Clarence’s self. The atheist Ingersoll, among his other promises, promised the liberation of clergy from the shackles of religion and its theories.

At this time, Clarence is reminded of the information given in the Bible about the false pride enjoyed by man in this world when he claims independence from God. According to the Bible, faithlessness is vanity and vexation of spirit. Even the learned scholars, if they are proud of their knowledge, why do they die as fools? Faith is fruitful provided that Christ is mentioned every now and then and we believe in him in this life and in after-life as well. Even a faithful person should plead to God again and again not to forsake him. This to remind him that he is valueless, sapless and spiritually dead without God’s Grace. On the other hand, the passage of Ingersoll’s *Some Mistakes of Moses*, narrated the desire of Ingersoll to break the link between the believers and the God. For him, the satisfaction of material demands and basic needs must drive the preachers towards the practicality of life. They should divert their lectures towards the ways of strife and preach the doctrine of vocation. The people and families are forced to concentrate on these doctrines which they hate and give no importance to.

For Clarence, these doctrines are not hateful but full of pity. All those years, these doctrines have been to him like a ghost among the faces of those from sick beds, Sunday pews and economically deprived households who sought him for help and
courage. All that these faces struggled for was, according to Calvin, ‘Grace’. Grace, as Clarence recollects from his past, graceful life:

...an interplay between men and God achieved within the mystery of Christ and His Placation of that otherwise ineradicable sin inherited from Adam leaving men with... lively tendency to disobey God.

(Beauty of the Lilies, 13)

This faith lay not in human beings themselves but followers and the preachers ‘in their agreeing to meet in faint hope of daily miracles’. God has assigned the preachers the duty of taking care of the followers and the faithful as an infant is nurtured tenderly.

Here Clarence is caught in a tug-of-war between Ingersoll and God on the matter of taking care of people. While God takes care of his people through the doctrines preached by clergy and offering salvation to those who lived and died in faith, Ingersoll forcefully refutes the point for material reasons. He believes in science and its forces and scorns those who ‘poison the minds of young’, ‘prejudicing children against science’ and not encouraging the deserving minds to achieve ‘sublime standard of reason.

(Beauty of the Lilies, 14)

Clarence is also reminded of European critics who never respected the Bible as religious book but earned their bread from behind its criticism. Shamelessly, they called themselves theologians while they undermined Christianity’s ancient supporting walls and pillars.

Earlier faith had given Clarence the majestic confidence of diving deep into ‘the dubiousness and facticity of the old Gospels of Mark and then return to the reassuring ground of Gothic, semi-bucolic Princeton, where his instructors radiated an undisturbed piety and his fellow students appeared uniformly stout in their vocations,
vigorously proof against disabling spiritual wounds’. It was a time when Clarence ate heartily and idea of eating never disgusted him; then these very books of library comforted him and quenched his restless, evangelical spiritual thirst but now these books formed a ‘comfortless wall’.

In his study Clarence caught glimpses of such books as Pilgrim’s Progress and Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners – which were related to the progress made by true believer who never left the path of righteousness. There is also mention of Victorian values like scepticism, doubt, reason which was being experienced by Clarence for the last many days. But even the Victorian Tennyson believed in placing Religious matters slightly detached from worldly forces and facts. But here Clarence, even after knowing and ‘drinking to lees’ the Christianity and its rules lost his faith though God never put him to fire test. Moreover his fingers tugged out The Origin of Species which is quite ironic for his position in the Church. The writer, Darwin, who himself was a clergyman’s son, wrote that ‘natural evidence should not shock or thwart the religious feelings’. People should be satisfied that law of gravitation is subversive of natural and inferentially revealed, religion. He also wrote about an author of his acquaintance who had expressed that knowledge of natural evidence is as important as original forms full of life and that God required making another creation to fill up the voids created by his previous laws. Darwin’s clarification of natural evidence proved life process so simply that God’s laws sounded very trivial as if they needed not to be carried out. Clarence still flipped about in the hope of finding some trace to regain the imprints of his faith but he soon gave it up. He was still grateful and at the same time surprised that ‘life’s mechanism never stops, it continues even in the person who is aware of his own death within moments’.

(Beauty of the Lilies, 17)
Surrendering before these miraculous forces, Clarence suspected weakly that the fault was in him and no atheist or scientific materialism was to blame for this collapse. Faith, which is a blessed force, protects a ‘Christian against the temptations of an age’. (Beauty of the Lilies, 18) Evil temptations have always been present in this world. Even the first apostles were surrounded by scepticism and mockery and Christ’s teachings were no less studied by Paul as by sceptics.

Now thinking about his professors he drives home a point that what they always concealed, was the possibility that all faith was about nothing. All types of Churches are no more than the evil pharaonic and Polynesian priesthood. The Church fathers who studied Jesus and Christianity were no different than common people or even atheists of their own time. They had to face the mortality which was also the fate of other people. They were never among the distinguished or blessed people. They never experienced such graces as – Eternity or Confirmed Salvation.

Clarence read a few pamphlets preaching about Christ’s promise of coming. Christ’s promise of coming does not involve his physical coming but is ‘fulfilled in the spread of Christ’s doctrine and the reproduction of his and spirit in the world’.

(Beauty of the Lilies, 19)

Another pamphlet involves Judge West’s opinion which reflects his robust optimism. His way of perceiving the world is optimistic which finds its vitality/sap in ‘faith in the goodness of God and the excellence of his creation. But Clarence pitied such optimism and fervour of faith which ‘shields the molten iron of natural truth’.

(Beauty of the Lilies, 20) The Church ‘with its fantastic doctrines,’ drags humanity towards pathetic human life. Hope is the essence of life and this is what Clarence has lost:
Hope is our sap, our warm blood. Clarence had lost his sap – not suddenly but over the nearly twenty years since seminary, when he and his cohorts, like soldiers training to brave the terrors and shadows that beset Christendom, had brimmed with the jolly, noisy juices of militant, masculine faith. It has been his vow, his vocation, to keep the faith, and he felt his failure within him as an extensive sore place, which rendered all his actions at his desk stiff and careful.

*(Beauty of the Lilies, 20)*

Hope results from the faith which has stopped finding its way to Clarence’s heart but even then he still believes in sublimity of serenity. He still believes in it and how it likes to reside in humble hearts and simple houses whereas overtly impressive construction always follows in vain. In a number of instances, we get glimpses of Clarence’s belief, at which sometimes he himself wonders. The same thing followed him when he was called upon the sick of his parish, Mr. Orr, who represents a rarely found pious, extremely faithful and God – fearing part of human population. Mr. Orr could never afford to enjoy worldly pleasures of any kind due to his meagre income but never forgot to thank God even when he slept hungry. He had always put up with a hard life but still not expected to exploit heaven’s comforts. As a human being, he thought, mistakes which he must have committed in state of unawareness might inflict him with divine punishment. Mr. Orr’s humbleness impresses the reader beyond expression and shocks the reader to realise that heaven is not such an easily affordable bliss. His complaint to Clarence includes the sermons which rarely talked about damnation or instructed the people to fear God. There are lectures teaching men to be compassionate to the poor and the less fortunate. Mr. Wilmot assures that every Christian is a victim of wavering faith. Ironically, faith is another name for ‘doubts,’
‘fear of being overcome by time.’ Doubts are so enormous that they become worth challenging (which means there is some degree of consideration bestowed to doubts by Christians). The philosophical doubts and forsaken feelings experienced by Clarence, his long-term doubts slowly changing into belief regarding God’s non-existence, God being a non-factor, origin of matter, evolution of man, pointlessness of universe, unimportance of man in the eyes of God – find their answer in a mathematical rebuke given by Dale Kohler in Roger’s Version but the resultant collapsed self of Dale takes us to Esther (Roger’s Version) who, on a Sunday morning declares to her husband, Roger, in her own way that she has found God in her heart who is calling her to meet His creation in the Church.

The dinner organised by Clarence’s family for church committee members is like a kaleidoscope through which Updike stretches his attention towards other problems of struggling 20th century America. In the meanwhile, Clarence is given ample time to reflect over his loss of Divine bliss. Sometimes ignoring the conversation over the dinner table, Clarence ponders over his own ideas and also wonders to what extent people believe in God. He came up with a point that God’s existence or non-existence is all about the end of worldly life and beginning of afterlife. Death is the exit to one and the entrance to other at the same time. Here, death is used as a Pun – end, mourning, detachment, no more on one side; and a beginning, unimaginable and fresh start, full in God’s sight, a monotonous praiseworthy eternity on the other. For most followers, this was the essence, aim and importance of religion for which they had not much to waste – about an hour on Sunday mornings. Such strange ideas about hateful and ungrateful nature of man strike Clarence during the Dinner scene. ‘The Dinner scene’ at Clarence’s parish-owned house is the most significant portrayal of mixed American society with most of
its members expressing their anguish before the capitalists. Here Updike collects nearly all the representative classes of American society – members of Church committee, private business people and also Parishnors, most of them undergoing financial crisis. The scene reflects the clashing views of employers and employees with regard to industrialisation. Mr. Dearholt and Mr. McDermott represent the industrial revolution and the Belonging Self of America which goes back to pirate Scandinavian spirit and wilderness of a continent which was inhabited by savages and cannibals. They eulogise American self as a result of hard struggle and as a life carved out of rocks, shelterlessness, merciless hardships of weather and environment. In the words of Mr. Dearholt, the mill-owner:

Struggle and survival, it’s been ever the way. . .it tests a Christian’s mettle. . .fight the good fight. Jesus was no namby – pamby. He knew life was a ceaseless battle. . .He came to bring a sword . . .the English and Scott who got here faced a wilderness. They had to fight cannibalistic savages! Those of you who came later are fortunate. . .we cleared the way. . .children and grandchildren will thank us. . .everything I say. . .to encourage my fellow Americans. Courage and faith, that’s all we need. Faith. There’s where the power to success comes from, in a land God favoured with such a wealth of opportunity. . .no free rides here. That’s the way we do things here.

(Beauty of the Lilies, 27, 29& 30)

They usher industrial revolution as healthy signs of progressive life. Not to talk of marvellous scientific inventions from time to time which leave such devourers of manpower and its ravishers richer than ever. Their praises for such developments as speedy machines with self fault-detectors, enable to produce double the quantity in just half the time with limited number of workers, thereby managing half a dozen
machines at one time. Hence less money goes out of the mill and that also in form of
controlled or fixed wages and heavy fortunes are made from exporting such large
quantity of product. Employers are blessed with dreams which soon come true as
expansion of cottage industries into large scale mills and firms. Moreover, the
emigration of refugees, pitiable faces and runaways guarantee low wage workers. In
his conversation with an Italian widow, Mr. Dearholt portrays America as a land of
fearless workers and not a land of ‘free rides’. The Italian widow laments the
heartlessness and brutality of industries where her husband wasted himself with the
fatal chemicals and perished. Here Mr. Dearholt comments that Europe for present
day Americans is a land where people care for each other but have no pinpointed aim.
America inhabits those who care for nothing but for money, trying his best to justify
American materialistic aims.

Mr. Kleist represents the anguish of a worker during industrial revolution. He
gives horrifying accounts of wages which were increased as long as the matter
benefitted the bosses and again brought back down when the workers got used to the
quantity of double work. He also talks about the unfair distribution of money and the
immeasurable gaps between rich and poor which were ever and ever expanding. He
talks about the weak motives of labour union, who, out of competition or corruption
never took a stiff stand against the employer classes. Helpless foreign women and late
immigrants were likely to be treated shrewdly by employers and kept at substantially
low wages taking undue advantage of their light and shallow established life and their
homes in need of income, no matter how low it is.

Americans, who have nurtured and developed their roots deep into American
Self, boast of their Scottish and English origin. They came as Catholics and still traces
are found in their spirit of adventure, courage and faith. Americans are so possessive
of this hard-earned nation that they hate to give immigrants their share easily. They never give away anything until they make sure that they have sucked the blood properly – a way of being very loyal to Capitalism.

After the dinner, Clarence has a long conversation with the church committee members. The church committee represents the dominant group of the first few decades of the American society. Capitalists apart from running industries, invest money in church to gain fame. Every effort and expense is directed towards a merely material end. The idea of constructing a two-storey Sunday school and church social wing and an upstairs space rentable to well-off foreign groups is given the name of ‘Growth of the Organisation’. Committee believes that anything that does not grow dies with time and is forgotten. Reputation is achieved through the physical size of the building and its outer magnificence even if it is a church ignoring the moral point that competition and envy with other churches and commercialisation of the very place to make up the expenses have no place in worship. Clarence was surprised how, even after losing his faith, he felt disgusted at the idea of materialism.

But awakening to his own reality, Clarence found that God to him was livelihood, foundation of his self and his family. He realised that his loss of faith would have worldly consequences for his family: namely, the loss of their parish-owned house and their social standing in the community.

(Michiko Kakutani, 1996)

In spite of all these feelings of disrespect and ungrateful resolutions on part of Clarence, God lent a merciful hand. Church heard Clarence’s plea for not being able to continue his services as a priest and thereby deceiving the one feeding him and his family. But the Church extended his services in Lord’s honour for an entire year. God never wants to leave his slaves unattended. He extends his attachment to them as long
as possible. But this duration could not cure Clarence of his wavering faith turned into faithlessness. If we judge Clarence on the basis of his honesty for willingly leaving a place because he no longer deserves it, still his upcoming life and degenerated health mark the beginning of God’s wrath. In fact, employment for a lapsed minister is hard to come by, and Clarence soon finds himself going door-to-door hawking cheap encyclopaedias: items he regards vaguely blasphemous products, ‘a commercially inspired attempt to play God, by creating in print a replica of creation’. In his free time, Clarence went to the movies, where he watched the world being created anew in newsreels and features and shorts. (Michiko Kakutani, 1996)

He never found relief in escapism and his rotten health could translate itself in spite of his silence. After blood-curdling humiliation and degradation out of door to door rejection of popular Encyclopaedia, Clarence slithered inside moving picture houses and found solace among the worshippers sitting scattered and silent within these ‘catacombs’. Ever since his revelation of God’s non-existence, he had been a victim of a crusty, clinging sense of loss warning him of the growing wrath of some faceless, dimensionless disciplinarian. Within the movie theatre he got chance to hide from his own accusation. He experienced relief in the images of other shadows in peril and torment which lifted his soul on curious wings of self forgetfulness. 

(Beauty of the Lilies, 104)

Moreover, at the same time Clarence could witness a new world being created with lot of material bringing his suspended disbelief into belief. Books published talked about courtesy, gallantry and materialism. Readers were exposed to new areas. For Clarence, the final paper-thin veil which still made him guilty about himself was raised with the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 which confirmed for him the absence of God to its very bottom. Had Clarence realised the proud statement under which ‘even
God could not sink the unsinkable’ in no time one could say that this was none other than the divine punishment. Besides, evil, cruelty of slavery exhibited the indifference of universe and God on the part of humanity. After a long day of humiliation, Clarence longed to forget, in a trance as infallible as opium’s, his fall, failure, disgrace, responsibility and nullity. 

(Beauty of the Lilies, 108)

Young and tender Theodore, the youngest of Clarence’s children could never stop accepting the indifference of God towards his father. He believed that his father should have been given a clue or a ray of hope or any other measure through which God had confirmed his existence. Teddy’s heart lamented the unending wait his father bore throughout his life after leaving the seminary.

Teddy used to be grateful to his average personality. He had already seen the negatives experienced by the family out of his father’s unique sharp mindedness and the troubles in which his own elder brother Jared was caught due to excessive pleasures derived out of attractive personality and exciting aims.

Clarence knows the inner beauty and softness of feelings of his youngest son. He knows him as a sensitive being condemned to watch his father die slowly and silently. Clarence wants his son to follow the American doctrine which was adopted from some Eastern country. The statement could be used for optimistic purpose on all occasions. The statement, ‘This too shall pass away’ kept the morale high. Clarence, in spite of having been sharp minded, confesses his inability to struggle for his goals. He simply took upon the vocation his father had dreamt for himself – ‘ministry’. Here Updike portrays the middle-class notions that are often imposed on youngsters. Children are forced to tread upon ways they are not made for. Later on, it might have an adverse effect on them as passion and excitement might subside with the time and when one realises the fault, it is too late and the person is left good for nothing.
Clarence is sure that his son will be fine with a caring heart and an average mind that he possesses. Clarence now realises that if he had valued himself more, he would have chosen for himself the life and vocation of his choice. He is afraid that Teddy is too tender to value himself. After Clarence left the ministry, Teddy could never pray for himself or for his own well-being as it seemed disloyalty to his father.

Many pages relate the anxiety of middle class families whose children are divided into ones who join war to impress others and win money based honours; and the ones who cannot wait till they can legally drop-out from the school and get lost in the clatter of mills and mines. Sometimes children interested in education have to kill their dreams for earning money. Here in case of Teddy, his father’s sin snatched his dreams of becoming a distinguished student at the school who would have utilised his leisure time in becoming a sportsperson or a promising star. Teddy’s elder brother, Jared, also suffered the thunderbolts of his father’s blasphemy. Increasing demands of age and flesh and a longingness for self-dependence draw the youth to war. In America it sounds impressive and prestigious and opens for them new gratifying doors as well. In words of Jared:

I’m going to be a soldier man. . .If you don’t, you won’t get any more pussy, that’s what our girl friends tell us. Over in France the mademoiselles do it to Americans for free. . .We go over there to save their ass. . .like the president says, who wants to live in a world run by Germans? They’d make you eat sauerkraut every day and wipe your heinie with a wire brush. . .They see that old red, white and blue flapping away, they’ll run, the dumb Huns. They can push the frogs and Belgies around, but they won’t push real he-men. . .

(Beauty of the Lilies, 117)
But the reality of war soon disillusioned Jared when he was confronted with the so-called glory of war which was just a mess of bodies, and while expressing his disgust for war to Teddy, he said:

. . .the war just a few miles away, their country a battlefield for four years, and these waiters in the bistros hurrying and scurrying making a quick franc on the Americans dragged over there to save their lousy froggy hides. . .war was just a mess of bodies, some dead and some still alive and kicking, and nobody had a notion in hell of what it was all about – why the war had come, or why it was going away. . .Millions died, and it just happened. . .It was weird, the war. . .guys you’ve been beside day and night, suddenly they’re dead – a piece of garbage. . .

(Beauty of the Lilies, 118, 119)

Opposition was gassed and the extremely shocked and lost souls longing to return to their motherland and never to cross its border in future. Those who return, most of them psychologically and physically crippled, are compensated with currency notes temporarily and left the so-called honour given to them by Uncle Sam. At another instance, Jared contemplated his near future with humiliation:

. . .for what they call my partial disability I’ll be getting fifteen bucks a month for the next year plus the sixty. . .living on Uncle Sam till I get back some use in my arm. . .one thing this war taught me. . .money is more important than pussy. . .

(Beauty of the Lilies, 119)

Ironically war does not glorify a nation or elate any adoration for further wars. Instead it makes the victims materialistic and just thirsty for money and money making. In this way, not only the worm of blasphemy was devouring Clarence but also the entire
nation was being devoured by the war in Europe – shortage of commodities, difficulties in shipping and youth drained out of the country to join war, either by free will or by force.

Women characters do not have a very prominent role in matters of ministry, war and industrialisation. Somewhere we see Clarence’s daughter, Esther, being confident and possessive regarding her personal freedom after the women got the right to vote.

The deep-felt inner guilt chased Clarence to the deep, dark theatres, barren ways and efforts. Clarence suffered silently observing his children bent under demands of time and age. He watched his wife serving in homes. And suddenly one morning he died as silently as he suffered. His death left a hurtful void in Teddy’s life. For Teddy, the way his father was erased from this world without leaving any instruction or message gave him the sense of absurd injustice. Somewhere he held God responsible for such a death which was not remembered but for the shock it gave the family for generations.

The family, without head, was left with no interest or aim to carry on in Paterson. Moreover, lack of income and inflation forced them to leave the place and move in with Clarence’s sister, Aunt Esther in Delaware, Basingstoke. Basingstoke does not get its mention before second lesson as a store house of British nostalgia, wherein the name itself and the name of the only river were given after the home place of the homesick colonists. The quiet atmosphere is compared to the material fever of the Paterson and other places translated themselves through rising mist in the morning and the evening – few mills, very less factories and agriculture being the main occupation along with greenhouse plants and poultry was the main hobby of the residents, yet the town did not fail to propel its prosperity thus improving the local
economy by dealing in mass destructive material. Sooner or later human life is bought and sold in terms of fatal chemical combinations and reactions. With not much population engaged in specific professions, people in Delaware could satisfy their basic needs by selling vegetables and owning shops in which they themselves worked and satisfied local needs of the inhabitants. To earn living for the house and with Aunt Esther not so strong financially to provide Stella’s family a luxurious living, the new settlers have to carve their livelihood by working in house garden and selling the vegetables door to door in Basingstoke. Even the art of selling vegetables in Basingstoke disgusted Teddy as he was reminded of his father’s miserable year of encyclopaedia – ‘peddling and a sense of suffering, a fatal humiliation’. In fact, venturing out every day for the same routine gave him feeling that he was selling a part of his own, everyday. Compared to Teddy, his mother Stella had the spirit of going through the troubles with a simple confidence and lack of embarrassment which helped her to adjust with all level of troubles. She took upon herself going out every morning with bags full of vegetables and offering to sell them at every door with a smiling face. Teddy never failed to envy his mother’s spirit of struggle. Many a times we get the notion that Stella represents the spirit that Updike wants to reform America with – an amalgam of faith, struggle, kindness, care, love, cool mindedness, adjustment, understanding, trustworthiness and sacrifice. Updike finds all these qualities in a mother and expects the American motherland would rise one day and inculcate such qualities in all her children. In a land, such as America, there have been only two options left to prove yourself an American – ‘Either be stretched or strike’ which means ‘a real American means to learn to adjust with low returns or cease to live’.  

(Beauty of the Lilies, 139)
According to Teddy, struggling for livelihood or proper identity did not reward his father or his brother Jared. Teddy did not want to study either; again his father’s failure could not encourage him to gain knowledge. In this way he wanted to end up crouched in an unknown corner without any question of struggle, trial or challenging the difficulties. He could sense that his father’s knowledge made things too clear for him to accept any power above him. The motion pictures which once lifted Clarence from dark pit of his life seemed to give Teddy indications about endless cruelty of life and above all the depression and hopelessness that in case of any mishap there is nobody above to grieve or console the victim. His father’s death had already proved it. What Teddy thought about the value of human beings was that ‘they are like a swarm of mosquitoes, crazy with thirst and doomed to be swatted’. Teddy never wanted to accept that his father could have recovered his beliefs someday. He lost the least interest in divine power and its marvels. Contemporary authors began to influence upon him. He gave himself up to extensive reading and works of Shaw, Mencken and Bertrand Russell tended to teach him about natural facts. These rational amusing English or American authors talked about self-help and mental health and main streets. Gradually he thought the church goers were hundred years behind and were ignorant about worldly concrete facts. Teddy’s agnostic self goes ahead to the extent that he puts the radical and God-mocking magazines right-side out the shop in which he works as a salesman, so that everyone could see it. He was a fan of Mencken because Mencken was closest in his writings to Shaw and Wells.

In that small town of Delaware, Teddy considered everybody as a rube. However a lame girl, Emily Sifford, attracted his attention with her willpower to continue honestly and faithfully with the life in spite of such physical challenge.
Emily represents the simplicity of faithful life. Apart from simplicity of life, she also represents love for natural plants living in bloom. Teddy feels disgusted with the cooked plants as compared to the live plants. In spite of all depression and disinterestedness towards God, Teddy loves life in all its sense and rarely imposes his Godless ideas on others. Emily symbolises a woman’s long felt aching pain resulting from feeling of inequality and lack of respect by opposite gender. She bitterly considers a woman as a being liable to wait for instructions given by males as to what she should do and what she should not. Also her reference and admiration to Swedish actress Greta Garbo, who, through the screen represents the courage of European woman or particularly courage that Every woman should have. For instance, every woman has the right to go after what she wants, be it a commodity or a man to love. (Beauty of the Lilies, 177) It refers here to the sum total of repressed emotions of Every woman in a conservative society where the only rulers are males. Every American woman has been an object of oppression since time immemorial. It does not matter where this inspiration for courage comes from. Through Emily, we find that the European cinema is a good source of inspiration to inculcate courage and self esteem in a woman. But the Americans are not ready to accept European ideals once they had shed them for this wilderness. They blame it as immigration and transition of European values to America. Though Methodism lifted the ban on theatre-going and dancing, so as not to lag too behind in the era of advancement, yet smoking, drinking and card playing were still considered to be sinful and illicit love was taken as their parallel. (Beauty of the Lilies, 171-180)

Besides avoiding European ideals, for Americans, the idea of having a drop of Negro blood is so hopeless and shameful that an American prefers to be physically
challenged than having black blood in his veins. When Emily gives various excuses to Teddy for being a daughter to Moor mother who was related to Delaware Indians:

She doesn’t have a drop of Negro blood. The worst you can say about Moors is that they might be related to the Delaware Indians. . .I have a horrible deformed foot but no black blood.

(Beauty of the Lilies, 201)

Mrs. Sifford avoids intermingling with people due to this reason. Her ancestors were thought to have worked in southern plantations. Her involuntary habit of covering her mouth with her hand signifies aloofness and that she has no say in the American issues no matter how domestic or trivial they are. Another member who has much to refute about European ideals and morals is Jared. Jared’s conversation is rich with ideas of Americans for other nations and creed. He says: ‘That’s something I love to see – a woman making good American babies to hold off the heathen Chinee. . .’

(Beauty of the Lilies, 224)

In this way, preference is given to pure American blood; Asian and Sub – Asian blood is referred to as heathen, particularly Chinese. American Protestants have opinions full of contempt and shrewdness towards European Catholics. This becomes clear from a slight disillusion experienced by Jared with his wife’s cold temperament as against what he thought about Catholics. He tells Teddy about his wife: ‘Lucille’s. . .pretty cold, it turns out. I thought Catholics would be warm and loving. . .or was it only Italians?’

(Beauty of the Lilies, 225)

He is left wondering whether the Italians were the only Catholics who still followed religion strictly.

Amidst all these ideologies and various mindsets Teddy could not stop lamenting the loss of his father. Anywhere at the mention of God, he was reminded of
his father’s useless wait to get a signal from which could prove the Divine existence but God had stayed silent watching his slave slowly decaying into a graceless, degrading and crumbling pit of darkness. For Teddy, every job meant venturing out every day with the same worn out routine and this reminded him of the fruitlessness his father had experienced. He also tried course dealing in numbers and accounts but to no avail. Jared tried to help him but in his own way. Having been swayed in race of money and profits, he failed to understand that what Teddy really needed was spiritual support to restore his faith to some extent. Jared took him to New York partly to acquaint him with the busy world and partly to detach him from the Methodist girl, Emily. There in New York, Teddy comes to know about the opportunistic nature of his country people. By the Americans themselves, America is treated more as a land of opportunity and self interest than as a motherland. The inhabitants carelessly uproot themselves from their families and settle down in technological pastures chopped of American self. America represents the new part of the world and New York for those people is the America which is building its new beginning where everything is dealt with numbers, accounts and money. As in Jared’s words: ‘McMullen Investments is paying us to bring the numbers in, so things add up. . .the banks are not interested in . . .hard – luck story. They want their numbers. . .There are no free rides in America. . .’ (Beauty of the Lilies, 194)

Teddy failed to gather his shattered self and longed for a safe corner in this world with Emily. After fruitless efforts in New York he came back to Delaware and once again his reluctance for a regular work disturbed his family. At such a time his aunt Esther proved a divine help and blessing for him which he rarely acknowledged in his life. He simply took it as a human help. Aunt Esther guided him to meet the head postmaster and apply for the job of a mailman. Aunt Esther is a guiding
mouthpiece of Updike, who makes journey of lost, wandering and doubtful Americans easier. She takes everything with a light hand and advices that ‘we all must belong somewhere or a person’s not a person. Nobody makes it alone’. Maybe that’s why even after becoming invalid she does not cut herself off from other people. Her telephone is a symbol of connection between herself and other residents of Delaware. Through this telephone she serves Updike purpose of unity and interlinking. At the time of her death, it is proved that death can detach the person from worldly links and technology helps no more. Here the telephone also symbolises her longingness for social relations as she never got any support from her husband.

In his novel, Updike has tried to link more than one character with the society. After qualifying a number of tests, Teddy resumes his walks and ventures out delivering mails which also represents a way of knitting together the society. Updike gave this character a natural tendency to bind human beings with each other from newspaper-selling in Paterson to ice-cream salesman to mail delivery. Another thing which gave him courage to accept the business of door to door delivery was the responsibility a person feels for his partner. The reader must have encountered such feeling of responsibility in earlier pages of the novel when Clarence, though broken and cheap, yet took to encyclopaedia selling as he was at the same stage years ago. He had wife and children to look after. The husband and father in him made him to continue to drag on in spite of the hollowness inside him. Teddy never happened to realise the sameness of nature of the work and the difference in its meaning. God had bestowed Teddy with a goal in his life and the wheel of his fortune ironically turned the disgusting everyday struggle for livelihood into a satisfying source for his fate. He made a good impression on Emily’s parents and his own family also had to agree for this marriage between a Protestant and a Methodist American. After Teddy and Emily
get married, Emily gives birth to a girl child who carries the family feminine name ‘Esther’. Born and brought up to kind and giving parents who cared for home more than caring for money blindly, child Esther or Essie was always joyful and proud at being herself instead of being somebody else. She considered herself as one of the most fortunate children to have been born, one of the member of a happiest home where all five members were secure and united as five fingers of a glove. She felt lucky of being the daughter of a man with a reputed job and a mother who was like a queen in her house and given due respect. The care and pampering with which she was raised up, was unique. Her mother wanted her to miss nothing of all that she had missed as a typical conservative country girl and with her limp that kept her from bodily grace. With a carefree life and a lot of time to admire herself, Essie loved her own body and would not lag behind in grabbing an opportunity to prove herself a goddess liable to be worshipped. Her robust confidence gave her the courage to take risks in her life. She treasured all the remarks that helped her to see herself from the outside, as others saw her. So sure she was of her parent’s care and their desire to give her security that she could feel her mother watching her as she carefully crossed roads. Even as a little girl, Essie never got frightened or worried outside her home. Self-security flushed with confidence made her hold her head very still and stare straight ahead. Updike also makes a comparison between the self – satisfied Essie and the valueless, spiritually poor and immoral young generation. Usually the adolescents are the most frightening. They do things far advanced as compared to their age, due to which they never know what they are up to:

From just the way their mouths moved and eyes flashed. . .you could see they cared about nothing but themselves, not their teachers or parents or the lord
above or anybody. . .four of . . .rapists, it was shocking, had been released from jail down in Alabama.

*(Beauty of the Lilies, 242 – 243)*

It is just a blood curdling account through which Updike wants to raise an alarm for the nation to announce the lame future of the country in these nonsense hands. Moreover, racialism is practiced to such an extent that whites can never tolerate the presence of blacks in any sphere of life no matter how trivial it is, which is clear from a conversation between two white women in the market when one of them says: ‘Next thing we’ll be giving the niggers, is the whole country to cut each other up in.’

*(Beauty of the Lilies, 243)*

War and bloodshed get on the nerves and theatrical productions try their hand in moralising people. Movies and cartoon movies were made to depict cruelty on screen, sprinkled with element of sadness to make the viewer realise cruelty more intensely. Essie, who gets a chance to visit Presbyterian and Methodists church, is confident about being friendly with God, and He being near to her. Many authoritative voices sound like God’s voice to her. She is sure that even though it sounded scolding, you knew it cared for you. This idea of Essie is a contrast with Clarence who even as a priest could not feel God’s unusual silence which meant his wrath and not an unawareness of the matter.

Essie’s love for hiding somewhere in the house or sitting safe inside while the rain drenched the world outside is just a hobby through which she cherishes the sense of security that she enjoys being with her family. Crouching in a dark place where no one can see you and you are subjected to no exposure, is a childish funny game for Essie wherein she derives pleasure but for Clarence this hiding from daylight was a vain shelter for his degrading self. Essie has inherited many of the last habits of her
grandfather but their reason is different. For the latter, it is invitation to personal innocent pleasure while for the former, it was escapism from intense humiliation and from acknowledgement of no more divine support. Movies take you to a wish-granted world where shining screen, swift-talking voices and sharp snapping movements take you to a safe edge with a happy ending. But danger does exist in real life and Essie also knew that people fell in them, whereas in movies, life and character is moulded as not to send the audience in depression and so that the audience clings to it even when they know it’s a dream-world. Here is the place where the audience finds their dreams coming true. Somewhere Essie’s unconscious mind could reach as far as Clarence and could guess that the tug-of-war between unfulfilled desires and the escapism sources to fulfil them were responsible for Clarence’s death. For Essie, her parents and grandparents were like four essential corners of a rectangle whose image she made with her hands after she woke up every morning. But in this rectangle her grandfather was like a ripped corner. His absence was like an inbuilt or crumbled corner in her life. Essie was well-aware of the incompleteness resulting from his absence especially when she could feel him satiating her life’s inner song. She felt him like a blessed hand over herself. Her feelings of God came from him. Here the reference goes to long back internalised Clarence’s sublime love for God. The very moments might have enriched him with divine wisdom and innocence, which his life could not give him. Teddy could never feel such blessing because he had been hurt with whatever his father had to undergo. Had Teddy known that rebuke or punishment of God was always accompanied with his care, he would not have turned deaf ears to call of the church. The remorse soul of Clarence finds its voice in the innocence of his granddaughter. He had to complete the struggle against the evil – the primary aim of
every faithful Christian. All these blissful qualities culminated to seep into Essie’s veins and produce a proud and loyal resident of Delaware.

Through Essie, Updike projects all the conscience and morality that should have been Clarence’s storehouse. Still a child not projected to the horrible reality of the third world and not aware of the religious depth, we find her a careful and vigilant girl. For instance, she learnt to cherish her body in an extraordinary manner. Crossing the roads of her town, walking straight ahead and treasuring it knowing that it is gifted to an individual only once and after completing its journey it has to perish in the grave. Any accident could damage it beyond repair. Updike feels the intensity and horror of Clarence’s mistake. The one brain, gifted by God for a lifetime, lost in darkness of evil only to subject the body to a slow decay and permanent humiliation. According to what Essie learnt at house if you made a mistake out of unawareness, it would last forever and such a mistake ruined Clarence forever.

In the words of Emily Safford to her daughter, Essie that Clarence’s death took away Teddy’s ability to love the world with confidence. May be this was the reason why Teddy felt comfortable with a crippled woman who won’t be able to become an object of any other man’s interest or love. The catastrophic shock of life left him too fragile to sustain another betrayal of any kind or detachment from any person. In words of Emily: ‘. . .he needed woman, and I was least threatening he could find. . .He just wanted to get through his vale of tears with minimal damage.’

*(Beauty of the Lilies, 269)*

Essie loved the family, her grandmother Stella and her maternal grandparents who tended to her physical needs and satisfy her desires. But it was the soul of her dead, unearthly grandfather that hovered about her all the time and she could feel it making earnest efforts ‘in his unreality’; pave with her the way to success and to ‘lift
her up towards the heavenly realm where movie stars flickered’. And Essie, partly due to the mysterious unreal presence of Clarence and her internalised habit of visiting church and praying to God, had it in her to pray spontaneously. Meanwhile she also felt her grandfather is lending her his affectionate ear and persuading God like an angel, to reward her prayers. It was one of Essie’s many secrets – the absent presence of Clarence in air. Essie was always curious about the way the tables turned in her favour. She knew that no human being was perfect but the way she prayed innocently to God, even while in bed, proved fruitful and here we feel the hard-earned purification of Clarence for his own soul being rewarded. Whatever he was denied due to his mistake that he committed in his priestly position, was being fulfilled through Essie’s innocent prayers. Very loud and winding passages give accounts of disgusting results of war and whatever changes were taking place wide and far. Somewhere the economy was taking its last breathe while somewhere else it experienced a boon, for e.g.: weapon industries, chemical factories experimenting with different elements and major efforts to produce more and more destructive sources, copper mines, etc. Long passages about ‘battles raging in every direction, situation of war field and killing of civilians, starvation of Jews’ give us an account of the radio bulletins introduced by a telegraph key. Americans were sure that Germans and Japanese will be given fatal blows and crushed to pulp. For them, the very names of these nations were hateful. The code number 666 was exactly the code for HITLER and was for the Americans a cursed number. Americans claim that the Jews dragged them into the war and Americans had to fight it to save the earth from the Jews. So, every American feels it his duty to go and contribute to the purification of earth. Here Updike is sorry for American youth who cannot think about their own future by
themselves but swaying in the waves and ripples created by fiery thoughts of their elders.

There is also reference to the world market which goes by consumerism and not by feelings and a camera man praises a commodity irrespective of its makers: ‘thirty-five millimetre instead of four by five. . .much more maneuverable, and it gives you a whole sequence of shots to choose from. The Germans make it.’

(Beauty of the Lilies, 279)

So in the nation, there are people not caring a damn about their nation’s hatred towards Germans, use and promote German technology shamelessly and go as far as naming themselves Doug Germaine, which Essie thought must have been an invented name. But on the other hand, Updike refers to it as extreme honesty on the part of professionals to connect directly or indirectly with production houses and model agencies. This class cares only for the world market and the dollar. Sometimes they explore striking figures and promote them honestly. More or less Updike eulogises this societal class for being unaffected by worldly ties, boundations and barriers. As in the words of Essie: ‘stars, writers and directors are the people who tell us what freedom means’.

(Beauty of the Lilies, 282)

Somewhere else Essie’s own aunt, young Esther says that after looking at some photographs of Essie she perceives glimpses of her father Clarence as if he had become an angel. During his life, Clarence kept waiting for any sign to get proof for God’s presence. He bore the punishment for his faithlessness and might have been rewarded in his after-life but the left over duties had to be discharged; those duties he sought to do through his son’s progeny. Somewhere the thirsty soul of Clarence was straining to fulfil his own desires of belongingness to the glamour world through Essie. He wants to learn how to enjoy life thoroughly along with remembering God
provided that feelings of self-esteem and cruelty against humanity do not creep into the veins. This might be the reason why all these harmless and unique qualities culminated in his granddaughter, Essie. That is why, for Essie, movie watching and then aspiring to become a star herself, was her passion. Whereas her grandfather, she had heard, took to watching of movies, after his books which helped save the entire community from damnation, failed to save him. He vanished into the world of screen where script writers could change the ‘fate’ of the character even before ten minutes of the shot, and the tragedy be changed into comedy, dead into alive, destroyer into saviour, etc. Everything, after passing through difficulties was brought to happy ending. Wandering in search of escapism was the reason as well as the result of divine supportlessness. He searched for his happy ending somewhere in the fate of the characters. God, though full of anger against him but forgiving, made Clarence wait for a signal but in vain. But his hard time was paid, though after Clarence’s damned body was perished. Clarence had to live a confident life, seek its pleasures and could do it through his angelic granddaughter who always felt: ‘a cosmic attention on her skin as when she was a child, God had watched her every move, recorded her every prayer and yearning, nothing unnoticed. . .’ (Beauty of the Lilies, 335)

Clarence’s longing for God was somehow fulfilled. And as in the words of Stella to her granddaughter: ‘When Clarence fell, it was so sudden and uncalled for, there had to be something to make it come right in the end’.

(Beauty of the Lilies, 350)

According to Stella, ‘human being is selfish by nature; Clarence could have served God selflessly, ignoring the temptation of faithlessness’. It is true as Clarence could have neglected the way of undue freedom but the selfish nature overcame everything. He should have understood that ‘every moment from birth to death is contemporary to
God’. Therefore, every moment has to be spent with care as every single drop of it will be evaluated with utmost objectivity.  

(Smith, 1983)

Essie’s only son Clark, was not so clever or striking as his mother. If looked at closely, there is a great difference in their upbringing. Essie was born to caring parents with stable relationship. Her own family was a fully fledged family in all its sense; a secure childhood, parents and relatives who were proud of her and taking her as the centre of attraction. On the other hand, Clark was a neglected child, without father and just locked up in a golden cage. He grew up neglected with a mother caring for her own convenience in Hollywood’s ups and downs. Weak or no sense of election created for him sexual as well as professional misunderstanding and the resultant loss of one or the other. Failing to be competent enough to secure for himself a place in any specific profession, he could never identify himself as Clark but as ‘son of Hollywood star Alma DeMotte’. He also tried his hand in porn production but to no avail. Unexpectedly, during one of his journeys he encountered a girl named Hannah in one of the restaurants. As he was new to the place, she took him to a temple to spend the night. Having freely enjoyed a chunk of this girl, he decides to stay till he feels to return to his own Hollywood world. But all of a sudden, he begins to identify himself with this temple and its leader Jesse Smith whose religious commune was called the temple of True and Actual Faith. Essie or Alma was aware of the void that her son had suffered while being with her and she thought herself lucky that such a step could ‘gratify the need to distinguish himself with the quality that suits a woman who always felt a cosmic heat on her skin, always her prayers listened and fulfilled’.

Later on, Clark feels that Hannah used her charms and misled him by taking him in her car to the temple for night’s rest. There at the temple, the mysterious atmosphere worked its magic upon the visitors in such a way that they were left in a state of
confusion whether they should leave for the world they belonged to or join this temple where residents claimed they were independent of any government and survived on their own means. Luckily some professionally amorphous residents made life easier by financial support as well as manual labour. To Clark’s surprise, all the women in the temple were sexual partners of the head Jesse Smith. They called themselves spouses of Jesse in Christ’s name. They also had permission to oblige other men for sex but they were to hold children of only Jesse in their wombs. According to him, his progeny as well as the children brought to the temple from outside were given education not through Sunday schools but through Biblical scriptures directly. In the words of Hannah, Jesse deals with love and instruction, thereby, leaving them decide by themselves, to leave or to stay. She told Clark that the residents try their best to maintain the independence of the building to the extent that minimal exchange of daily needs is made with outer world. They try their best to live as independently as ‘lilies’ which grow in water without any connection with any parent plant or roots. But as man is a social animal, he has to feed himself and interact with others. So, they had to keep track of the government policies as well as maintain a link with outsiders through wireless operations. The residents were just surviving in the temple, not enjoying any pleasure expect sexual pleasure and that also to flourish a race for their deity – Jesse Smith. They are waiting for the Reckoning when Jesse, the lamb will save them from eternal damnation. Through accounts of conversation between Jesse and Clark, Updike struggles to convey the loneliness, alienation experienced by Clark since he was a child. Updike feels the need for enriching the children with religious knowledge. Only if the child is kept close to religious places, fed with lessons laden with religious fervour and talked to about God’s love and innocence, only then they can be considered spiritually complete. None other than these blessed ideas can bring
forth a promising, peaceful and angelic generation. Somewhere Clark feels the thirst of spiritual attainment in his life. He feels that his mother Alma DeMott was a loved and favourite part of her own parents’ life whereas he himself could not enjoy such a childhood. Business and success blinded Alma to the extent that she could not share her religious pride and satisfaction with her only son. She never mentioned God to him and he could never expect such a careless and selfish mother born of as caring people as his grandparents. All he could get were lame answers now and then from his grandfather, Theodore Wilmot, who along with his wife, Emily, could feel the ups and downs, digressions and depressions that Essie met in her way of success. Again, it was just a human success, which is always temporary. In her declining years, she was left with no choice except the contract assignments of soap operas appearing on television screen which she despised since her childhood. In the career of a movie star, every break has to be named as minor or major break upon which her entire future career rests. Alma became a big success but she paid the price by coming down the ladder forcibly to accept of TV screen. Had she been a part of middle class society, she could have gathered enough courage to retire on her money with dignity. But retirement would not give her the sense of relief or completeness of some services which she could happily pass on to younger generation, like her father Teddy had done in his office. These are not the rules of a ‘Vanity Fair’. That’s the penalty of success that nobody knows when and where to stop. Ambition and desire go on aspiring endlessly when ironically every journey has its ultimate end. Whereas retirement for a serviceman means rest, relaxation, peace; for a star it means being forgotten, lost and identity less. Being known or remembered as long as possible is what their career is all about. That is the very reason why Alma on the verge of sixty married to a rich husband and rich on her residuals subjected herself to long morning
and afternoon makeup and rehearsal sessions, trips across Atlantic, lonely hotel nights and received orders from a young director enough to be her daughter. In spite of that, time exercised its abstract power upon her and she was gradually being forgotten. People started to get confused about her co-stars or the ones she was once cast with. It was clear that ‘she had been mulched in – what had once seemed to her absolute immortality turned out to be a slow dissolution within a confused mass of perishing images like a colourful mountain of compressed and rotting garbage’.

*(Beauty of the Lilies, 465)*

As Essie Wilmot paid a heavy price for her stardom by giving up her real name, identity and all her life trying her best to fit into those letters of a new unknown name, Alma DeMott, and on the other hand, her son had to give up his own name for joining the commune. For some time he could not feel comfortable with his new name, Esau. It seemed to him a mock name after he read about Esau in Genesis. In the Genesis, Isaac and Rebekah’s firstborn, red and hairy, a rough hunter who was his father’s favourite but was cheated of his birthright by his twin brother, Jacob, who had been born clinging to his heel and became his mother’s favourite, thereby stripping Esau of their father’s blessing. Esau had been a rube. On his part, Clark could feel as if he had been cheated by the commune into deserting the real world of pain and suffering which he originally belonged to. He was later pacified by Hannah who acquainted him with the secret of the story that Esau later forgave his treacherous twin. Hannah was sure that Clark had a good heart. Somewhere she knew that he had been attracted to a commune in search of divine truth. It was not his fault that these people were treading such wrong ways to God which led them headlong towards damnation. Hannah had been successful in exploring the rare virtue of forgiveness in Clark and she knew that a sinner like Jesse would need forgiveness from God as well as from his
victims to be awarded salvation. We find Updike’s heartfelt feelings such blessed virtues in its children as the absence of the same would continue to cost them the lives of their children. Any specific nation has no right to interfere in other nations’ affairs and disputes. A grand nation such as America should learn to forgive petty political matters concerned with other countries. Updike’s thirsty model, Clark, is presented as a haphazard soul groping for Divine Salvation but not a single sign to guide his way, though he possesses such traits which human beings in present world are hardly blessed with. Updike expresses his longingness for such traits which can grandiose a human being to the level of sublimity and thus become among God’s favourites.

God’s faithful followers never need any kind of spell to keep them clung to God. On the other hand, Jesse had his own power of words which kept the residents of commune hypnotised. Esau, in Jesse’s presence felt possessed of some value like nowhere else. Out of surprise and personal conflict, he could not accept such a change in himself and moreover, lack of knowledge about Almighty and His blessed power, could not give Clark a chance for any steadfast judgement. He was also unable to leave, tied by gravity to the so-called Jesse. Knowledge of Divine enrichment fills up a creature with confidence and this becomes clear when Alma says: ‘I know this type. This tow is full of megalomaniacs; it’s the environment. Any man who can sleep with a new girl every night of the week. . .think he’s god. . .they get in so deep embezzling and lying they can’t back out.’ (Beauty of the Lilies, 457)

Therefore, Essie, in spite of having become careless about God, is still confident of his presence very near to her. In other words, confidence and power for firm judgement comes from a soul rich and drenched in Divine love. Esau became one of the followers of Jesse but when the U.S government officials got reports from surrounding areas about young school goers being stopped from schools and
introduced into this clan, they came for an inquiry and Esau was given responsibility
to convince them about harmless and innocent education given to these children not
only for their worldly benefit but also for their Salvation. Esau also gave them an
account of the weaponry in the temple but not an authentic one. Gradually the
situation turned more violent and a school bus was shot in its tyres by one of the male
fervent. Esau was shocked by the way Jesse wanted to tackle the situation by firing
the bus with children inside. Somehow Esau managed to persuade him not to shoot
the bus. This deliberate harmful attack inflamed American government which could
not tolerate more publicity for killing of citizens and the commune had to be
controlled. The temple was surrounded by intelligence authorities and its residents
were promised medical attention as well as protection provided they should surrender.

During such period of turmoil, Jesse, the saviour, experienced an ironical
situation comprising of valuelessness, absent mindedness and impotency due to low
spirits and quoted to Esau lines from Bible where God warns people from following
any layman. Last sermon was given by Jesse just before the climax when military
comes to throw in capsules of tear gas and thus force the residents to leave the temple.
Jesse talked about the Cup that God wanted Christ to drink from. He named it the Cup
of Wrath as was it meant to bear the pain of death. He advised all the children and
women to be ready to drink it. While the military succeeded in exploding various
parts of the temple, Jesse ordered his men to start killing women and children one by
one on the pretext that their way to heaven was clear. After a woman and a minor girl
were shot down and another woman fainted, suddenly from nowhere ‘a flock of
sparkling dark immaterial bubbles descended into Esau and he knew what to do’
(Beauty of the Lilies, 484). He grabbed a revolver and shot the false prophet (Jesse)
twice. He also suffered a bullet in his left shoulder but continued to yell and guide the
women and children outside the castle persuading them that ‘those outside are your friends’. Esau was not afraid of death now that he had avenged God by killing a false God. Also he knew, he would be arrested and his mother would be humiliated before press and media persons. Moreover, ‘the living God laid hold of him’.

(Beauty of the Lilies, 486)

While Esau got a divine blessing and possessed something all by himself more valuable than the hypnotic power of Jesse, we feel those bubbles that had left Clarence silently, had descend into Clark after some 80 years to enable him to rescue a group of fanatics, mainly women and children, from the clutches of false faith. In this way, ‘it is with Clark that the Wilmot saga comes full circle until the thing that seemed to capsize the Wilmot family will be the very thing to heal it’.

(Megan, 2009)

All the televisions of America and Europe flashed with the breaking news of explosion of the castle. Clark is declared as a martyr who died safeguarding oneness of God and rescuing the women and children by sending them out to safety. The last scene depicts the pathetic condition of women and many children black and filthy with smoke and dirt. The reader cannot help thinking about the future of these children whose fault was that they were being misled by their so-called elders. What has replaced the solid faith of the generations before is something that is unstable and casual and something so ungrounded in the actual word that it actually leads to death rather than life. In the last scene Updike is questioning what is being passed on to ‘the children’ as a legacy as the decades continue to roll on. The connection with something is gone; the words are watered-down and meaningless. Joining the dots of family history can be fascinating: seeing how one family member has left their mark on another; what forms of parenting have enabled or disabled a child; what have been
the important damaging things that get passed down, either in personality or in personal philosophy and how integrated or dissolving is the society that is formed by and which forms these bonds.  

(Palimpsest, 2011)

Updike is a master of his craft as he expertly weaves together his saga of a struggling American family set against a backdrop of a century’s old faith that provided a foundation for America and Hollywood films that create an impossible and unrealistic standard of American life that has shaped the nation’s psyche in ways that even Americans fail to realise that Updike uses Hollywood, both to pace his story through the decades and to reveal the American people obsessed with stars and the idealised version of reality they project even as they abandon the Christian ideals that once grounded them and enabled them to endure the hardships of everyday life.

(Megan, 2009)
Works Cited


